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ABSTRACT

A case study of 1100 high school teachers in a large urban district that has experienced declining enrollment for eight years illustrates several of the exit options and career mobility effects of riffing (reduction in force). The findings show that during decline, freely chosen movement out (exit), or laterally (moderate number of location changes), or to enhanced positions was reduced for all, riffed or not. But women and minorities were more likely to experience forced exit (riffing) and more apparently nonvoluntary lateral moves. Further, women were more likely to end up with unwieldy teaching loads, including more preparations in more diverse contents areas. When given the exit options of resignation and retirement, more senior women took them than men, but the content areas which showed the greatest percentage of voluntary exit use were typically male dominated areas (industrial arts and math), where the risks of exit were reduced due to external demands. To young teachers, especially young female and minority teachers, riffing signaled their second class citizenship. To potential teachers, it signaled that high schools are not places of professional growth. And to the school district itself, riffing signaled, or should have signaled, the district's declining long term health. (CMG)

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RIF-RECALL AS SYMBOL AND SIGNAL: THE DIFFERENTIAL EFFECTS OF RIFFING ON TEACHER EXIT CHOICES

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RIF-RECALL AS SYMBOL AND SIGNAL: THE DIFFERENTIAL EFFECTS OF RIFFING ON TEACHER EXIT CHOICES

Perhaps the single most visible result of contraction in public schools is the lay off of teachers--what has come to be called riffing (reduction in force). Throughout the country, teachers in urban schools have faced the threat of rif since the early 1970's. Both the threat and the reality of rif are blamed for the exit from teaching of many highly qualified teachers. Further, the lowered morale and decline in the quality of teacher work life that such riffing produces, even among the non-riffed, has been blamed for the loss of still more good teachers (Cooke,Kornbluh, and Abramis, 1982; Potter, 1981; Weber, 1975).

Certainly the forced exit that riffing represents can be seen as a barrier to career mobility--what could be a more obvious impediment to an individual's attainment of success in an organization (however success may be defined) than not being in the organization? There is, however, more to the relationship between riffing and career mobility than the simple, but devestating forced exit of some teachers. These less apparent, as well as the apparent, ramifications of riffing are the focus of the following remarks. Results of a case study of 1100 high school teachers in a large urban district that has experienced declining enrollment for eight years will be used to illustrate several of the career mobility effects of riffing, particularly for women and

minority teachers.

Exit, Moving or Stuck

Examination of the effects of riffing on career mobility of different groups within the public schools can be given form by reference to the works of two individuals, Hirschman (1970), and Kanter (1977). Hirschman has proposed that the response options available to clients or members of groups that experience decline are exit and voice, that is, leave or become active to bring about change. He described various situations where individuals will leave, and ways in which this exiting can be curtailed by an organization. Additionally, he offemd that a healthy organization needs a healthy mix of exit and voice--it needs loyalty to hold exit in check long enough so that voice has the opportunity to stop organizational decline before everyone leaves.

Hirschman's work focused on the institutional level, and therefore provided little explanation of the sources of loyalty among the non-exiting members. We must, therefore, add our own explanation, which is to suggest that one primary reason people remain loyal is that they perceive that doing so will meet their own basic subsistence and/or higher level needs. Here then enters the basis of the desire for career mobility, for through such mobility one is able to fulfill not only the basics of life, but also one's need for a continued sense of self worth, a sense of power over ones destiny, respect of others, and involvement in something

larger than oneself, a need for novelty and so forth.

Kanter (1979) has described the experiences that precipitate the perception of success or failure in this whole constellation of higher needs as those where one is "moving" or "stuck" (p136). Persons who are moving are finding success, gaining opportunities, growing. Those who are by circumstances made to feel stuck respond to the lack of opportunity for movement with increasingly unproductive behavior, which in turn decreases their opportunity for further movement.

If we combine, then, some of the elements of Hirschman's theory of exit,voice, and loyalty, with some of the elements of Kanter's model of the moving and the stuck, we can begin to examine several aspects of the career mobility of teachers during times of decline. First we can look back at the teacher shortage years and see what the exit options were for teachers when times were "good".

In the years of school expansion, teachers could use a number of different exit options to move into what they considered to be a "better" position. For example, teachers not satisfied with the career choice of teaching might venture into another career e.g. insurance sales, knowing that the teacher shortage condition was a guarantee that there would be a position to which they might return if the new career did not work out. For those teachers satisfied with teaching, but dissatisfied with the location they found

themselves in, choosing to exit either to a different district or different school was a viable option. In some cases, the choices were not made between the poor school and the good school, but rather between the good and the best school, or the more convenient of two good schools. Teachers could continue to choose to move until they were in what they perceived to be the best school for them.

Other options existed without moving to a different school. During the times of expansion, teachers frequently had the opportunity to exit the less desirable classes. As teachers gained a few years of seniority they could ask for the more challenging and rewarding classes, which in some cases meant teaching the courses they wanted and in other cases the kinds of students they wanted. Teachers also had a chance to opt out of the teaching positions requiring too many different preparations. Many teachers at this time also looked forward to exiting full time teaching responsibilities and choosing to work as department chairpersons, guidance counselors, or administrators. These career options did not necessarily bring greater monetary rewards, but teachers, in exercising these options had a sense of control over their lives, a sense of moving.

We can now look at a data base derived from a particular situation in a declining district to see how teachers options changed. We can look for any differentials in the numbers or percentages of persons with different characteristics who were forced to leave (riffed with no recall), who left with

some degree of choice (riffed and resigned, and resigned), who were threatened with forced exit but remained (riffed and recalled), and who were never threatened (continuiing). We can next examine more closely, those who were "loyal", that is, were either recalled or continuing, to determine if there were any differences among groups in their access to exit options and in barriers to career mobility.

In the course of a case study of the effects of decline on quality of instruction (Gehrke and Sheffield, 1984) we gathered data on 1100 high school teachers who had been in a large urban school system for all or part of an eight year period of decline (1975-1983). We recorded data from three years: 1974-75, the year before the first big district layoff (Over 1000 teachers were riffed district-wide that Spring for the following year); 1975-76, the year when most of the riffed teachers were recalled; 1982-83, the last year of decline prior to data gathering. Information was collected on the teachers' employment status, sex, ethnic category, seniority, certified majors and minors, location, and teaching schedule during each of the three years. These data were used to ascertain whether there had been an increase in the proportion the teachers were teaching outside their certified major--an elemental aspect of quality instruction. The mean proportions different groups of teachers taught in their major can be used for our purposes here, as well as group means for the number of teacher preparations, and number of locations over the eight-year

period. These figures, along with raw numbers and percentages of persons falling into certain employment status categories over the years, supplemented by information from interviews, provide some thought provoking, even disturbing findings.

Findings

Decline or contraction in a school system generally requires that some teachers lose freedom of choice (exit options, or mobility options) by being forced to exit--they are riffed. Because riffing was carried out in this district according to senioritiy within content-area categories, a supposedly equitable criterion, we would expect that a greater percentage of the junior teachers would lose their exit options. Because women and minorities are more likely to be junior teachers (having found high school teaching positions more open to them only in recent years), they might also be expected to be riffed in higher percentages. On the other hand, affirmative action programs might be expected to protect them from riffing or at least assure a more rapid recall. The actual numbers show interesting patterns.

The Riffed-No Return. We begin with those teachers who experienced the severest loss of the exit option, that is, those teachers who were riffed and who were not recalled (N=28 for 1975, N=31 for 1982). As expected these were typically the teachers with the least seniority. According to the data gathered for 1975, a greater percentage of women

teachers were riffed and were not recalled, also more white than minority teachers; fine arts majors; and individuals teaching an average of .76 of their time in their major area of preparation (compared with .71 for the total teaching population). In 1982 there were some changes in the characteristics: still a greater percentage of women than men, and still fine arts major, but now the percentage of minorities was greater than that of whites. Career mobility for high school teachers in this district with these characteristics was certainly "minimal".

The Riffed and Resigned. A short discussion of riffing in the school district studied is necessary before we discuss the riffed and resigned group. This school district engaged in a practice which might be described as "over-riffing". Uncertain of state funding and enrollment, and operating from a conservative position, the district administrators did not want to have teachers under contract for the fall, whom they could not afford to pay. Each spring for six of the seven years of decline, the district thus riffed more teachers than necessary, and then recalled the teachers in the fall. In 1975, teachers were not familiar with the over-riffing phenomenon and, unless they had access to district level information, they had no reason to doubt that riffing notices delivered in the spring really meant no position in the fall. Our interviews suggest that some riffed teachers, in spite of the recognized finality of the rif notice, continued to wait and hope for recall throughout the summer and even into the

fall. The waiting period for many riffed teachers was spent actively seeking employment elsewhere, and also communicating with the district personnel office to determine their chances of recall.

We do not know how many teachers in the riffed group waited right up until the fall before accepting employment elsewhere, but we do know that for some teachers, this waiting period was not feasible. Perhaps these individuals saw the rif notice as a critical incident in their professional career or perhaps they had personal reasons, e.g. financial responsibilities. It may be too that, acting like the customer alert to quality changes in the organization (Hirschman,p.24), they were not only able to anticipate the implications for their own career (getting stuck), but also recognized the decline in the whole organization, and presented their resignation as a message that they were concerned about the practices of the district.

Whatever their motives, a number of the high school teachers did resign immediately or shortly after the rif notices were sent (N=19 in 1975). Waiting for recall was not an option for them. This group of individuals was likely to have the characteristics of the general rif population, but also shared characteristics with the teachers who simply resigned without having been riffed-- to be discussed later. Like all riffed teachers, these had under ten years of experience and were teaching a high proportion in their major at the time of rif. Unlike the riffed-no return, the

majority in this group were white men (12 of the 19). The content area with the highest percentage of riffed teachers who resigned in 1975 was Industrial Arts (6.8%). Thus, not only were the riffed-resigned teachers white men, but many possessed skills which they knew were desirable elsewhere, either in teaching or in other occupations. (There has been a shortage of Industrial Arts teachers since 1945.)

The number of riffed-resigned teachers for 1982 showed a large drop from the early year (N=2 in 1982). Interviews with teachers who had been riffed and returned to the district provided an explanation of this change. During the riffing years from 1975 to 1982 teachers came to be "rif wise". They realized that, though it was no less painful to be riffed each year, there was a good chance that they would be rehired. Some teachers suggested that they had learned to manipulate the system and knew how to work to assure their survival. The risk of waiting it out appeared to decrease, and teachers were more likely to wait and see. The two who did resign in 1982 were, however, male Industrial Arts teachers.

The Resigning Teacher. Theoretically, teachers who were not riffed still had the option to exit teaching entirely. However, the awareness that the district was actively pursuing ways to reduce the teaching ranks, and that many other districts were in a similar declining state, made the the risk in exiting the current position increase. Teachers were no longer confident that they could find other teaching

positions and, if a new career outside teaching did not work out they could not be assured that they could return to teaching. During 1975, when the district signalled a decline with the large teacher rif, we found that white women were more likely to resign without having been riffed than any other group (1.7% of all women,.9% of all men). Perhaps these women could afford the risk involved in looking for another job or perhaps they resigned for more traditional reasons such as raising a family, or spouse transfer. The business area, an area with a relatively high percentage of women, had the highest percentage of individuals resigning without being riffed (4.8% of Business majors). This may be accounted for by the increased opportunity for those skilled women in business and industry. (Mathematics was second with 2.5% of mathematics majors resigning. Resignations in this area have often been attributed to increased outside opportunities.)

Those teachers who resigned had a mean proportion of .83 teaching in their content area, while continuing teachers had a mean proportion of .67 for the same year (1975). Our data do not provide reasons why these individuals with higher proportions resigned, but we might hypothesize that for them

teaching in their major was important, and when the district began to lay off and change teacher assignments, they chose to leave rather than take less appropriate teaching assignments. They were, in Hirschman's terms,"quality conscious".

An increase in teachers resigning, from 12 in 1975 to 20 in 1982, supports the claim that an exit from the district was still an option for some teachers. Women more than men (2.8% of the women, 2.5% of the men) continued to exercise this option in 1982. While no minorities resigned in 1975, four of the 20 resigning persons were minorities in 1982. The percentage of black teachers resigning (3.3%) was greater than the percentage of white teachers (2.6%).It may be that affirmative action policies throughout business and industry eased the risk element of exit for minority teachers somewhat by 1982.

Admittedly, the number of resigning teachers for both years is only a small percentage compared with the total high school staff. Our data, however, do suggest that even as opportunities for teaching jobs elsewhere decreased and the job market in general became tighter, certain groups of teachers, white women, and later minority, business and math majors were slightly more likely to use the exit option than others.

Retirements. Retirement is usually seen as an exit option only for those teachers who are at the end of their career. Under such conditions, a discussion of retirement in

a paper on career mobility is likely to be out of place. In the district studied, however, the group of high school teachers who retired in 1982 is of interest to us because, during that year, the state introduced an early retirement incentive. Thus teachers with fewer years of seniority could choose to leave teaching early and perhaps even have a chance for a second career outside of teaching (or in another school setting). The income for retirement would provide some security for those seeking future employment. Once again we can look at differences in the groups of individuals exercising this option.

In 1975 when there were no retirement incentives, the actual numbers of those retiring were small, but the percentage of women retiring was more than twice that of men (women 2.7%, men 1.2%). The percentage for 1982 was greater for both groups as expected (6.9% for men and 8.2% for women).These percentages suggest that early retirement increased the advantages of exit for men, while remaining high for women.

Teachers majoring in Industrial Arts showed a greater percentage retiring in 1982 than any other major. Previously the greatest percentages of retirees had been in Home Economics and Fine Arts. The fact that Industrial Arts majors did make use of the retirement option to exit does not alone provide evidence that these teachers had a greater opportunity, but our observation of this event together with what we already observed among the resigning teachers begins

to build a case for the claim that high school teachers with marketable majors continue to be less stuck within the organization during times of decline.

The Riffed and Returned. Two groups of teachers did not choose to leave teaching. The characteristics of these teachers are of interest because they were among the individuals who were eligible to experience the options within the system which could still provide some sense of movement. For 1975 and 1982, women and minorities were present among the riffed and returned in greater than expected percentages. These individuals, either by choice or necessity, waited for a recall notice. Through our interviews we learned that many of these teachers did not know that they had a secure teaching position until a day or two before school began. Others were placed on a substitute list and did not return to a contract position until some time into the school year. These late-placed teachers lost seniority and consequently were more likely to be riffed the following year than their cohorts who had been under contract since the beginning of the year. Also, since many options within teaching are based on seniority, these teachers could anticipate a longer wait to get the positions they truly wanted.

In our earlier discussion of options for teachers who stay in teaching during "good times", we found that teachers dissatisfied in a school could choose to move to another school within the same district. Our data on the decline

period indicate that there was still movement; 52.5% of the individuals in the riffed and recalled group who were with the district from 1975 to 1983 moved three or more times. But three or more moves is really excessive --hardly an indication of movement for growth. Our interviews revealed these moves as forced moves rather than moves by choice. Teachers would rarely have chosen to move to a new school during this time, unless doing so would assure them a job for the following year. Because they were frequently moved, these riffed and recalled teachers were unable to gain the seniority within a building that is often an informal requirement for promotion to department chair or administration positions.

Throughout the period studied, the percentage of time spent teaching in one's subject area declined from .78 to .68 for the riffed and returned teachers, in contrast with a decline from .69 to .66 for continuing teachers. Rather than moving into positions where they were likely to be teaching more in their own content area (a favorable option in good times) these teachers were asked to take on subjects outside the areas for which they were certified. Dividing one's time between two or more content areas/departments places one at a distinct disadvantage in presenting oneself as a viable candidate for department chair, for one has only half as much time to focus on the affairs of each department.

As suggested earlier, acquiring a teaching position in which one has fewer preparations might be viewed as

advancement in the teaching career, or put another way, as enhancement of position. Since the riffed and returned teachers had little choice about where or what they taught, one would expect that the number of preparations was also not an option. The riffed and returned group started with an average of 2.87 preparations in 1975 before they were riffed, and taught about the same number in 1983 (2.85). But by 1983 riffed and returned women taught the second highest average number of preparations (3.07), second only to black male teachers (recalled and continuing) who taught 3.12 average preps.

In general then, for women and minorities who were riffed and recalled, the few internal movement options typically offered were less available during the decline. In fact, these areas in some cases became areas for additional strain--more content areas, more preparations, in new unwanted locations. Some interviewed riffed teachers explained that each year was a reenactment of their first year of teaching, with all its accompanying stresses. It is very difficult for teachers to experience a sense of movement or accomplishment in an organization if each year they are asked to start from the very beginning.

Continuing Teachers. A description of the career options for the continuing group of teachers completes our picture of teacher opportunity during decline. The continuing teachers were never riffed, but for the least senior, the threat of rif was an annual experience. Teachers

never knew for certain how many years, even days, of seniority were necessary to save them. (Seniority was calculated to the half day.) Teachers felt pressured to refrain from using sick leave for fear they would use it up and then be forced to take unexcused leave at some later time, thus changing their seniority rank.

The most senior teachers were, of course, the least directly affected by the annual riffing fear, but because rif and recall frequently required schedule changes for several teachers, it was more than likely that senior teachers also lost mobility options during this period. Some were forced to move, due in part to the closure of two of the district's 12 schools, but only 22.4% of them taught in three or more locations. This small percentage does point to a more stable school life for senior teachers, so they were, of course, more likely to stay in a building long enough to qualify for the prized positions.

The mean proportion teaching in major was .64 in 1975 and .67 in 1983 for continuing teachers. There is, then, a very small increase for this group in contrast with other groups that experienced a decrease. These teachers were likely to be teaching as much outside their major in 1983 as in 1975, which leads us to believe that many of their assignments outside major were the result of their own choice prior to decline.

Continuing teachers may have continued to teach the content areas they wanted, but the figures for preparations point to some compromises. The average number of preparations increased for continuing teachers from 2.77 to 2.84 over the eight year period. They increased considerably for black male teachers (from 2.29 to 3.12) and moderately for white female teachers (2.95 to 3.03). Black female teachers actually reduced their preparations (3.43 to 2.91), as did other female and male minority teachers (3.29;2.63 to 2.87;2.44). Note, however, that women in general started with higher numbers of preps and continued that way throughout.

Conclusions

So, in general what can we say about the exit options and the career mobility of teachers during decline? We can say, of course, that freely chosen movement out (exit), or laterally (moderate number of location changes), or to enhanced positions (to teachable content, to managable preparations) was reduced for all teachers whether riffed or not. But women and minorities were more likely to experience forced exit (riffing), and more apparently non-voluntary lateral moves. Further, women were more likely to be saddled with unwieldy teaching loads, including more preparations in more diverse content areas--teaching loads which could certainly lead to a sense of being stuck. When given the exit options of resignation and retirement, more senior women

took them than men, but the content areas which showed the greatest percentage of voluntary exit use were typically male dominated areas (Industrial Arts and Mathematics), where the risks of exit were reduced due to external demands.

The signals such declining mobility sends are read by at least three different audiences. First, they are read by young teachers, particularly young female and minority teachers, as signals that they are second class employees. As Wheatley (1981) building on Kanter's work pointed out, those who feel stuck, begin to act stuck, displaying negative characteristics that further reduce their possibilities for movement through promotions (p.258). They are likely to become territorial, vocal complainers who block change rather than seek it. Given the increased union activism, the suspicion, belligerence, and general low morale found among the district teachers during this time, there is little doubt that many teachers were reacting as might be predicted for those who are stuck.

The declining mobility also signals potential teachers that high schools are not places where they will have the opportunity to experience professional growth either in the classroom or on the rather short educational administration career ladder. When bright young people observe their high school teachers every day, and see them either overwhelmed with work, and/or caught up in depression, bitterness, and complaint, they are highly unlikely to choose that work or those colleagues. The effects on the profession are obvious.

Finally the declining mobility,the disturbed exit-voice mix, sends signals to the district system, that it is, indeed, unhealthy. Unfortunately the district we studied was for many reasons unwilling or unable to respond adequately to those signals. The voluntary exit through resignations and retirements were viewed as a blessing rather than an alarm, because they relieved the administrators of the agony of riffing. The increases in preparations and in proportions taught outside major were only vaguely recognized by administrators, and even then the implications for either quality instruction or professional growth of the teachers were not realized.

The typical "stuck" behaviors of the teachers became the reason for further administrative actions curtailing the freedom of the teachers (treating the symptom rather than the disease). The increasing alienation of teachers from the administrators decreased the opportunities for productive use of voice while increasing the unproductive grumbling.

Lest we fail to give credit where credit is due, these events occurred in a district which has been strongly committed to affirmative action. The district worked assiduously to maintain minority teachers within the system in placements at schools in proportion at least equal to the minority population of those schools. It was committed to an extensive desegregation program. The teacher's union supported the district's affirmative action program. Even in a well-intentioned district, then, policies and practices can

function to undercut goals.

The contraction of the system, managed as it was, with little or no apparent concern for the long range effects of the riffing and recall policies, communicated negative signals to the practicing teachers, and to potential entrants to the teaching profession. It communicated particularly negative signals to women and minorities, practicing and potential, who were both forced from the system and more immobilized within it than were others. If occurences in this district are typical, it is no wonder, then, that on a national basis, women and minorities are avoiding teaching careers and moving into opportunities in business and industry.

But the worst damage of all may have been done to the district system itself, which lost not only the skills of some women and minorities, but also the productive mix of voice and exit, and the equally important sense of moving among its individual members that contributes to an overall sense of system movement. A school system that loses this momentum is faced with the increasing exit of quality conscious parent/clients and a subsequent continuing downward spiral. There does not appear to be a happy ending.

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